
I *The Child Within*

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JOHN HOLT

"The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom."

ALICE WALKER

In the dedication to an earlier book, I wrote that my mother had "performed the miracle of loving others even when she could not love herself." At the time, I thought this was the biggest and most mysterious gift she had given my sister and me. But in recent years of listening to stories of other people's childhoods and reading books on childrearing, I've realized she did something even more difficult — and more rare. She managed to break the pattern of her own upbringing and pass on something quite different to us.

In spite of a childhood marked by more discipline than love — and in spite of the difficulty she and all parents find in giving their children something they themselves did not experience — my mother did her best to make us feel unique and worthwhile. Over and over again, in every way she knew how, she told us that we didn't need to earn her love. We were loved and valued (and therefore were lovable and valuable) *exactly as we were*.

What seemed to help her in this heroic effort to break with her own past was a childrearing theory she had absorbed from theosophy, a school of spiritual thought that blossomed in the early twentieth century and survives to this day in the writings of Krishnamurti, Annie Besant, Madame Blavatsky, and many others. "Children don't belong to us," she used to say, paraphrasing what she had learned from this blend of many world religions, especially Eastern ones. "They are little strangers who arrive in our lives and give us the pleasure and duty of caring for them — but we don't own them. We help them become who they are."

Even in the face of some crisis or misconduct, she always tried to make a distinction between the behavior and the child. We weren't "bad girls" because of this or that act, or "good girls" if we obeyed. "I love you very much," she used to say sadly in moments of discipline that were more effective than any harsh words; "I just don't always love the things you do."

This conviction of being loved and lovable, valued and valuable *as we are*, regardless of what we do, is the beginning of the most fundamental kind of self-esteem: what psychologists call "global" or "characterological" or (the term I find most descriptive because it connotes something that comes first) "core" self-esteem.

As infants and small children, we cannot possibly earn our welcome in the world; yet we sense very soon whether we are in fact welcome. The comfort of having someone respond to our cries and needs, the sensuousness of being cuddled and held, the reassurance of seeing ourselves intensely "mirrored" in the faces of caregivers, the sheer pleasure of hearing sounds and, a little later, words of love and encouragement — all these things confirm (or their absence denies) our welcome. Perhaps that's why the most child-loving cultures,¹ and those childrearing practices that seem to produce the most secure children, share a belief: it is not possible to "spoil" a child before the age of two or three. Total dependence on the world creates a corresponding right to feel that it is totally dependable, and that we are the center of it.

Later in childhood, we begin to develop the second and more externalized kind of self-esteem, which psychologists call "situational" — the sort that comes from knowing we are good "at" something, compare well with others, meet other people's expectations, and can complete ever more challenging and interesting tasks for the sheer joy of it. In this phase comes satisfaction with new abilities, a new sense of interaction and community with others, and increased curiosity about the world, which we satisfy with all five senses.

But families and cultures that do not foster core self-esteem — and then ration out situational approval in return for obeying, fitting in, serving the parents' or group's purpose, and doing tasks that are always assigned instead of chosen — produce kids who feel there must be something "wrong" with their own interests and abilities.

They therefore begin to create what psychologists call a "false self" in order to earn inclusion and approval, to avoid punishment and ridicule. Thus, the small boy who is told to do such impossible things as "take care of your mother" or "be the man of the house" is teased and humiliated for showing his vulnerabilities, or is aggrandized and worshiped for a superiority he knows is unreal, often begins the elaborate construction of an "inflated" self, which results in the mostly male problem known as narcissism.² And the little girl who is discouraged from strength and exploring, or is punished for willfulness and praised for assuming a docility and smiling sweetness she doesn't feel, often begins to construct a "deflated" self, which results in the mostly female problem of depression.³

These kinds of intimate pressures and expectations are almost impossible to resist, even for children with a sound base of love and esteem. For those who do not have that base, it may not even be possible to "go underground," to continue a sense of a true self *behind* the false creation.

Since no amount of situational approval can completely fill the resulting emptiness inside, the need for approbation and community becomes so strong that it can be exploited to make people of any age work, compete, and serve in ways that clearly go against their true self-interests. Cultures and families for whom the main emphasis is on roles, conformity, obedience, or just "fitting in," and who don't develop and reward each child's full circle of unique talents, are penalizing themselves in the long run. Without that feeling of intrinsic value, it's hard for children to survive the process of failing and trying again that precedes any accomplishment. It's harder still to enjoy successes once we achieve them or to support the successes of others.

Indeed, when core self-esteem remains low even into adulthood, no amount of external task-oriented achievement or approval seems able to compensate. On the contrary, the needy child of the past is a kind of emotional black hole into which external rewards disappear — which is why a lack of core self-esteem can produce totalitarian leaders for whom no amount of power is enough, grandiose money-makers or spenders of inherited money for whom no amount of display is enough, and authoritarian parents for whom no obedience is complete.

With some sense of intrinsic worth, however, children can survive amazing hardships. Certainly, my mother's early miracle of unconditional love helped us through the later neglect and hard times that came with her depressions and withdrawal into a private world.

The need for supporting core self-esteem doesn't end in childhood. Adults still need "unconditional" love from family, friends, life partners, animals, perhaps even an all-forgiving deity. Love that says: "No matter how the world may judge you, I love you for yourself." But if there was an early deficit at the core, needs that are appropriate to childhood will constrict and dominate adult life. In any patriarchy, for instance, absentee, inexpressive, or withholding fathers are so much the result of values and job patterns that keep men from taking equal care of small children that two abnormal results are often assumed to be normal: men who keep seeking approval from paternal authority figures, and women who keep looking to their husbands and male lovers for fathering.

Core self-esteem doesn't remain neatly divided from the situational kind, either. Like two sources that flow into one river, they are separate only at the beginning. But the point is: Self-esteem, like everything else about the growing human organism, is developmental. If the individual self inside each child is ignored or punished at age two, or four, or six, some part of us remains two or four or six — until we return, recognize what happened, and begin to repent ourselves. It's a version of what Ernest Hemingway wrote in *A Farewell to Arms*: "The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places." Those places don't always get broken as early as childhood, but when they do, they hurt more in the resetting and take longer to knit. Perhaps the compensation is that afterward, they become even stronger, just as we form antibodies to a disease once conquered, or defend with scar tissue skin once wounded.

The problem is that if societies produce obedience by withholding core self-esteem, they are likely to discourage its mending, replenishing, and healing, too. The idea of intrinsic worth is so dangerous to authoritarian systems (or to incomplete democracies in which some groups are more equal than others) that it is condemned as self-indulgent, selfish, egocentric, godless, counterrevolutionary,

and any other epithet that puts the individual in the wrong. If people feel they have a value that needn't be earned, the argument goes, how can they be made to work? Why should they continue to strive at all?

To answer this question, we need only remember that it is in infancy and early childhood, the period during which we are most likely to feel unconditionally loved, that we learn and stretch our abilities more than at any other time in our lives. No one had to reward us for learning to roll over and crawl, or penalize us for not standing or walking. We didn't need orders to explore the world around us, or a competition to say our first words. These things were learned for the sheer joy of accomplishment, stretching our own abilities, choosing what we wanted to do and then doing it — the surest path to good work at any age. Then, expanding the limits of our bodies and minds, with no false division between the two and even with great risk and effort, was a reward in itself. It still is.

People who are worried about laziness and the work ethic need only look at examples of chosen work versus compelled work, or work for which we feel personal responsibility and pride versus that done in an anonymous group. The truth is that, like every other part of nature, human beings have an internal imperative to grow. With enough sun and water to put down deep roots of self-esteem, children can withstand terrible storms. Without them, the slightest wind will seem full of danger.

II *Finding the Broken Places*

"Break open your hearts
Turn around and go back
across the wintry land."

SHARON DOUBIAGO

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